
This report is the latest development in the framework of a larger project ‘Minority Politics in Southeast Europe’, launched in 2000 with a study on minority issues in Bulgaria. In line with the idea to analyse the positions and current issues with minorities in specific Southeast European countries, the idea of the Macedonian project was to look at several aspects of inter-ethnic relations in Macedonia. A two-day workshop was held in December 2000 in Ohrid, attended by many journalists and intellectuals that represented most ethnic groups in Macedonia. Almost three months later, the Macedonian conflict erupted and made it imperative to redefine the Macedonian project and refocus it on the conflict.

The report is therefore the result of a year’s work: starting with the workshop, the work continued with close monitoring of the developments in 2001. This was supported by interviews with local connoisseurs and actors in the events, conducted during several trips to Macedonia, to places including Skopje, Tetovo and Aracinovo.

Starting from the conclusion drawn from the mentioned workshop that the conflict came as a general surprise to the Macedonian public, the report goes on to provide a chronological, and at the same time analytical, overview of the events until the signing of the Framework Agreement in August 2001. It further examines the negotiations at Ohrid before this signing, the public reactions and debates during the Agreement’s ratification, and ends by examining future scenarios. The report also contains an overview of the international factor in the conflict and its solution authored by Professor Mario Zucconi, as well as a historical background to the conflict written by Kristina Balalovska.

The aim of the Skopje meeting was to present the report to the wider Macedonian public, and at the same time to give space for reactions to its contents. Toward this aim, prominent Macedonian intellectuals as well as journalists were invited. In his presentation, Alessandro Silj stressed the lack of presentiment for the coming of the conflict, in spite of the real lack of inter-ethnic dialogue in Macedonia. In trying to go to the origins of the conflict, he stressed a mixture of external and internal factors, but also, what he called, a structural problem that emerged with the new establishment of borders in a post-Yugoslav space. Another structural problem he mentioned, one rather connected to the solution of the conflict than to its origins, was the capability of the Macedonian economy to manage a post-conflict society, and the erosion of such a capability because of an on-going problem with corruption. Kristina Balalovska presented on the historic background to the conflict, stressing that, from a historic point of view, violence could not have been expected. In her opinion, nevertheless, there were elements to reduce the trust necessary for a constructive co-existence of the two ethnic groups in Macedonia, or, once the conflict had erupted, for its definite conclusion.

The general reactions to the report were positive, stressing its objectivity and comprehensiveness. The substantial responses, nevertheless, evolved into two main dimensions. Speaking of the origins and predictability of the crisis, Professor Mirjana Maleska of the Institute for Sociological, Political and Judicial Research could not agree that no-one predicted the conflict, but stressed that the real problem had been to face its possibility and solve it. Professor Gjorgi Spasov responded that the conflict could not have been predicted since it did not have to happen: In his opinion, ethnic Albanian demands could have been put through via the established institutions. What made the conflict a reality, though, was the mixture of regional factors. Vladimir Milcin of the Foundation Open Society Institute put forward the two dominant versions on the conflict’s origins: Was it an inter-ethnic one, or was its criminal dimension dominant? Either way, in his opinion, there are still open issues and therefore he saw the necessity for another meeting to evaluate what the standing is at the moment and what risks lie ahead for the future.

The future, and indeed the current problems after the Framework Agreement, was the other point around which the short debate evolved. Mr Milcin, for instance, saw the issues still open since he doubted that anything would be won by the consensual democracy arrangement, having in mind the continued scope for political manipulation. Edward Joseph of the International Crisis Group in Macedonia stressed that the only level of ‘hopeful’ inter-ethnic relations in Macedonia today is corruption, and this can in reality only aggravate the situation. Pessimism prevailed as well for Mr Silj, and this was the general note...
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